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ABSTRACT

Although the rate of divorce among older Americans has increased steadily, little attention has been paid to late life divorce. To describe the role of age and other factors which might influence adjustment to divorce in later life, data from a larger pilot study were used: 81 divorced persons over the age of 60 completed in-depth, structured interviews; and data were collected from records of 240 individuals filing for divorce, in which one of the spouses was over 60. Results showed that divorcing older adults shared many characteristics with younger divorcing persons, e.g., low occupational status, few assets, weak religious ties, urban residence, weak kinship ties, and early marriage. The cause often given for divorce was lack of emotional gratification, generally precipitated by a particular stressful event. Although women were more likely than men to rate their marriage as of low quality, they reacted more negatively to the idea of divorce. Men were less successful than women in post-divorce adjustment. A divorce adjustment model developed to predict low post-divorce adjustment suggests a set of relationships between five predictor variables: anticipated cost, divorce experience, consequences, time, and sex. Sex, type of divorce experience, and overall consequences accounted for over half the variance in post-divorce adjustment scores. The findings sugggest that without the roles of wife and mother, older divorced women are ill-prepared emotionally, socially or financially to adapt to divorce. (JAC)

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FACTORS INFLUENCING ADJUSTMENT TO LATE-LIFE DIVORCE*

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To date almost no attention has been paid to divorce among persons in the later stages of the family life cycle. While the lack of attention to divorce among older persons may have been justified in the past by the small number of individuals occupying that status, such arguments can no longer be justified. The rate of divorce among older Americans has increased steadily over the past fifty years and a steepening of the upward curve in the rate of divorce for older persons has been predicted (De Shane & Wilson, 1981a).

Even if the rate of divorce among older persons does not increase, the absolute number of older persons who are divorced is expected to climb sharply in the next several decades. Indeed in 1977 the U. S. Bureau of the Census reported that approximately 600,000 persons over the age of 65 were divorced; by 1979, this figure had increased to 767,000 persons. While some of the increase is due to the movement of divorced individuals into old age, changes in age-specific divorce rates indicate that not all of the increase can thus be attributed (Carlson, 1979). These increases suggest that divorce will become a more important issue in late life adjustments.

Late life adjustment involves confronting a series of major life transitions. Most of these transitions are experienced to some degree by all older persons. Indeed some, such as the post-parental role of retirement from work, are anticipated and are duly heralded as special accomplishments. Yet, even approved transitions such as these often are extremely stressful events, particularly if they occur prematurely or in rapid succession. Divorce is neither approved, nor widely experienced. It is in fact, a non-normative event (McCubbin, et. al., 1980; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). As such, the level of

stress associated with late life divorce might be expected to be quite high and to impact negatively upon the well-being of those who experience it.

The research to be reported upon here describes the role played by age as well as the factors which influence adjustment subsequent to divorce in late life. The data come from a larger pilot study funded by AARP Andrus Foundation in 1981. Data came from two sources - records of 240 individuals filing for divorce in the State of Oregon and in-depth structured interviews with 81 individuals involved in those actions. Only those divorce filings in which at least one of the parties was 60 years of age or older were used in the sample. Tests conducted indicate that the interview sample (n=81) generally was representative of the initial sample (n=240), leading us to believe our results are generalizable, at least to the older divorcing population in the west.

Profiles of Divorcing Older Persons

Before examining the model used to predict factors influencing adjustment, it would be helpful to examine the characteristics of individuals who get divorced in late life, as well as the events which characterize the divorce process for them.

As can be seen in Table I, perhaps the most reliable thing is how similar to descriptions of younger divorcing persons they appear (e.f. Price-Bonham & Balswick, 1980). The majority had low occupational status, few assets and weak religious ties. They were urban residing, had weak ties with kin and reported marrying and having children at an earlier than average age. A comparison of seventeen couples in the sample indicated higher educational

TABLE I

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS IN A SAMPLE OF DIVORCING OLDER PERSONS

	N	Percent
SEX (n=81)		
Male	38	(46.9)
Female	43	(53.1)
AGE (n=80)		
Under 50	3	(3.8)
50-54	5	(6.3)
55-59	14	(17.5)
60-64	31	(38.8)
65-69	18	(22.5)
70+	9	(11.3)
$\bar{x}$ = 62.3 years Range: 41-78 years		
OCCUPATIONAL STATUS (n=81)		
Unskilled, semiskilled	50	(61.7)
Skilled labor	14	(17.3)
Managerial, professional	17	(21.0)
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL (n=78)		
Less than 12 years	22	(27.2)
12 years	18	(23.1)
More than 12 years	38	(48.7)
$\bar{x}$ = 12.9 years Range: 0-18 years		
EMPLOYMENT STABILITY SCALE (n=73)		
Less stable	23	(31.5)
Moderately stable	19	(26.0)
Highly stable	41	(42.5)
$\bar{x}$ score 12.0 Range: 5-15		
HEALTH STATUS SCALE (n=77)		
Poor	27	(35.1)
Average	26	(33.8)
Good	24	(31.2)
$\bar{x}$ score 9.1 Range: 4-12		
RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION SCALE (n=78)		
Weak	31	(40.8)
Moderate	30	(39.5)
Strong	15	(19.8)
$\bar{x}$ score 5.2 Range: 3-9		
RESIDENTIAL STABILITY SCALE (n=78)		
Less stable	17	(21.8)
Moderately stable	32	(41.1)
Highly stable	29	(37.2)
$\bar{x}$ score 6.7 Range: 3-9		
FERTILITY SCALE (n=79)		
Low	23	(29.1)
Moderate	45	(56.9)
High	11	(13.9)
$\bar{x}$ score 6.1 Range: 3-9		
MARITAL HISTORY SCALE (n=80)		
Less stable	21	(26.3)
Moderately stable	33	(41.3)
Highly stable	26	(32.5)
$\bar{x}$ score 7.6 Range: 4-12		

attainment for females and disagreement over religious convictions in a majority of cases. They had higher than expected incidence of poor health and their marital history indicated one half had divorced previously.

We did not find, however, that divorcing older persons were less residentially or occupationally stable than other populations of older persons, nor did we find any evidence of a rural to urban migration before or after divorce action was filed. The majority of the marriages had endured much longer ($\bar{x}$=20 yrs) than the median seven years reported for the general divorcing population and had resulted in the birth of one or more children.

Certain profiles, which lend to confirm existing stereotypes, were identified from the data, including: (1) the multiple marriage, characterized by three or more divorces; (2) the mistaken second marriage, typically entered into after a brief widowhood; and (3) the collapsed marriage, representing a marginal quality marriage of long duration. Of these the collapsed marriage was, by far, the most common in our sample.

One obvious question is why individuals would terminate a marriage in which they had invested so many years. We speculated that personality deficits or inadequate role performance identified as explanations in younger population might also contribute to late life divorce. It may be, indeed, that individuals who experience multiple marriages are exhibiting symptoms of an inadequately developed personality or that those who cannot adjust to life with a new marital partner perceive the role performance of the second mate to be inadequate. But few of our sample had failed repeatedly in marriage or were trying to accomodate the role expectations of a relative stranger.

In examining the collapsed marriages prevalent in our sample the importance of "love" and "affection" in long marriages was confirmed. The "cause" given typically involved "lack of emotional gratification." Our subjects expected marriage to entail more than continued accomodation at any cost. Yet the absence of love was not enough to induce individuals to seek divorce. In long marriages the decision to divorce typically involved a lengthy period of thinking about divorce prior to the actual filing. Thoughts of divorce were precipitated by a general unhappiness in the marriage punctuated by occasional periods of acute strain. At some point, however, the balance tipped in favor of divorce.

This tipping often appeared to take the form of a particular event such as an adulterous affair, retirement, illness, conflict over a major purchase, or the launching of the last child. Interestingly, this precipitating event often served as a means to focus a sense of general dissatisfaction with the marriage. Whether the event was of an on-going nature (e. g.adultery) or represented a new experience (e. g. retirement) at least one of the marital partners viewed it as overwhelming evidence that what had been tolerable in the past would get worse in the future if things did not change. Individuals responded to these precipitating events in different ways. Some perceived these events as opportunities to live differently, others saw an opportunity to do things differently in their marriage. Each one, however, went through a period of reassessing the marriage.

This reassessment of the marriage and the formulation of an alternative attraction (Lenthall, 1977) to a deficient relationship occurred at a vulnerable point in many marriages. The data show most of the individuals in long marriages of moderate to low quality had experienced a fair amount of life stress in the

ten years prior to filing for divorce. They also indicated no strong relationship between low marital quality and high life stress suggesting that stressful events do not generally, in and of themselves, impact marital quality.

A high investment goes into long marriages. A marginal rate of return represented by marriages of low to moderate quality may be acceptable when there are other sources of gratification or if the support provided in the marriage is adequate to deal with the external threats to marital cohesiveness. Removal of other sources of gratification, such as that represented by work, or an increase in external stressors, such as those caused by illness, may require a reformulation of the costs and benefits in a marginal quality marriage of long duration.

In our sample significantly different responses were found for older men and women to the termination of their marriage. Women were significantly more likely to rate their divorcing marriage as low quality, but more likely to react negatively to the idea of a divorce. This may reflect an assessment of a higher cost of divorce for them. Conversely, men rated their divorcing marriages more positively; they also reacted more positively to getting a divorce.

Qualitative data presented in the interview provided some explanation of these differences. Older women foresaw few opportunities to establish a new life or for "retooling" to live a different life. They were much more likely to promote a confrontation in hopes of forcing change within the marriage. In contrast, older men envisioned the opening up of opportunities to

do things they had always wanted to do, yet were concerned that the cost of their "freedom" not be too great. Males were more likely to force a confrontation hoping to be able to call the bluff inherent in "either/or" situations.

These attitudes may help explain the ambivalence the majority of subjects exhibited during the dissolution of their marriage. They may also help explain the amount of conflict surrounding the divorce, as well as why, unlike in younger populations, males were just as likely to file as file as females. Women appeared to be seeking to increase their benefits and men to reduce their costs associated with divorce. Few individuals portrayed themselves either as hapless victims or as joyful participants in the divorce process.

Sex also was strongly associated with consequences and post divorce adjustment. Females reported more negative consequences, used less effective problem solving strategies, were less successful in resolving their problems, and exhibited higher levels of post divorce stress. While not particularly surprising in and of itself, the "gender gap" in late life divorce was stronger and much more pervasive than anticipated.

Women were less happy in their marriages, but were less willing to end them. They reported more organizational activity, more interaction with friends and family, but were less positive about the support they received from those sources during the divorce process. Women reported more social censure and more negative feelings toward their spouses and others perceived as responsible for the divorce. After their divorce women were less likely to be dating, less enthusiastic about remarriage and less optimistic about the future.

AGE AND DIVORCE

The significance of the gender gap reported above naturally leads to speculation as to whether the differences found were, in part, a function of age. We had speculated that the methods of sampling and the small numbers of older persons included in the samples (because of their low rate of divorce) might be the reason that age differences were not found in earlier studies. Despite an increase in the size of our sample and a more restricted age range, we were unable to confirm age-related hypotheses.

In our sample, age alone appeared to play an insignificant role. Close examination of the data revealed almost no significant differences between age and other variables of interest. Age did not appear to be associated with those personal and marital characteristics related to divorce, the "causes" of divorce, the type of divorce experienced, the consequences endured as a result of divorce, nor adjustment subsequent to the divorce.

One reason age did not emerge as significant may be related to the way in which our age groups were defined. Although we attempted to select appropriate boundaries to our two stages in the life cycle and birth cohorts, we may have missed the mark by using chronological age alone to define these events.

Our speculation about chronological age being an inadequate marker is fueled by an observation of the age differences evident in many of the couples involved in the divorce action in our sample. When a marriage between two people has endured for a long period of time, a certain amount of blurring of

differences might be expected to occur. Such fading represents, in effect, a regression of sorts to a mean set of experiences and values. In point of fact, the social exchange model of Lewis and Spanier (1979) implies this process of blurring is one way of successfully adapting to marriage. Although subjects in our sample may have been unable to "fade" enough to be successful in their marriage, they may have adapted enough--after a long marriage in particular--so that their age was no longer an accurate marker of events for them.

Of course, it may be that age truly has little significance. Effects generated by stage in the life cycle or birth cohort may be overshadowed by major life events, particularly non-normative ones. Divorce may be a unifying event, much in the way that being a twin or being a victim of a violent crime acts to orient perspective related to the shared trait. The main event is, after all, divorce.

Relationship Between Age and Sex

The literature does suggest that older women in particular are likely to suffer more from divorce. Thus, we assumed that at least the females in our sample would show some age differences. Again our assumptions were not supported. Our findings did not show a decline in adjustment with advancing age for females. Rather, although not significant, we found those women under the age of 65 to have lower adjustment than those over the age of 65.

One possible explanation for this finding is that those women under the age of 65 also had higher life stress scores. It may be they were coping

with more stressful events at the time of their divorce. Further, the economic status of those women under age 65 was less stable than those over the age of 65, resulting in greater financial strain subsequent to the divorce.

These findings are very suggestive. It may very well be that the relationship between age and post divorce adjustment is curvilinear. That is, after a low which occurs in mid life (45 - 65 years) females may be less affected by the divorce. Economic independence of sorts may be achieved through retirement; being alone is more common as other older women become widowed; and decreasing parental responsibilities may provide more time or interest to develop roles apart from that of wife and mother.

PREDICTING ADJUSTMENT TO DIVORCE

A major part of our study was concerned with adjustment to divorce in late life. A divorce adjustment model was developed to predict which individuals would score lower on post divorce adjustment. This model, shown in Figure 1, suggested a set of relationships between five predictor variables--anticipated cost, divorce experience, consequences, time and sex--and the criterion variable--post divorce adjustment. Table II identifies the items used in the predictor and criterion variables for the regression model. In our model we hypothesized that a higher anticipated cost would result in a more negative divorce experience, that a negative divorce experience would result in higher negative consequences and that higher negative consequences would result in lower post divorce adjustment, with sex and time acting as intervening variables.

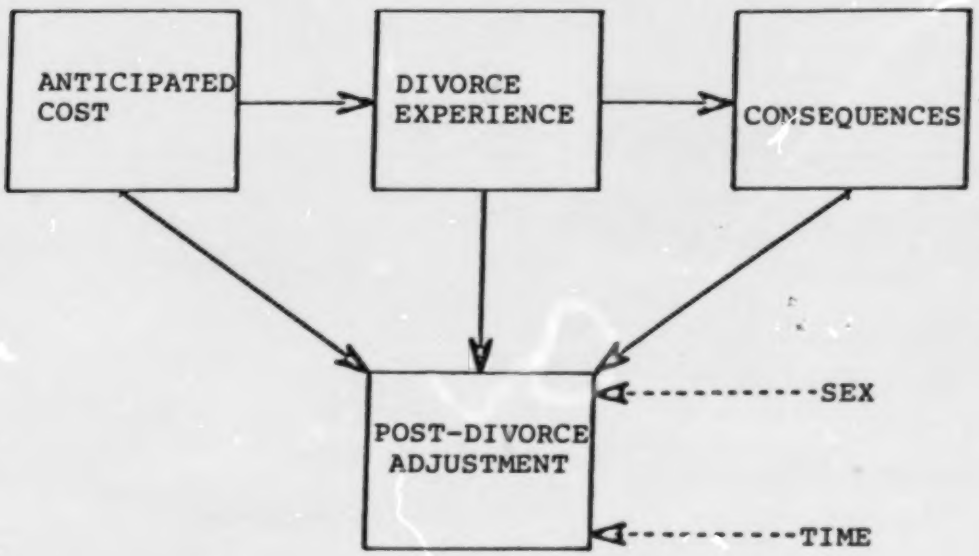

Figure1 . Divorce adjustment model.

TABLE II

ITEMS USED TO CREATE PREDICTOR AND CRITERION VARIABLES IN DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT MODEL

ANTICIPATED COST	
Marital risk scale	n = 57
Marital quality scale	Range = 28-84
Life stress scale	
DIVORCE EXPERIENCE	
Processual conflict index	n = 78
Emotional reaction to divorce	α = .86
	Range = 2-6
CONSEQUENCES	
Legal consequences	n = 62
Social consequences	α = .74
Economic consequences	Range = 60-180
Psychological consequences	
ADJUSTMENT	
Langner psychiatric checklist	n = 79
Problem resolution score	α = .85
	Range = 5-37
TIME	
Computed length time (months) from first thought of filing to interview	n = 81 Range = 1-76
SEX	n = 81

To test our model, we put forth seven hypotheses about the relationships the various components of the model had with one another, as well as with adjustment. In our analyses, we determined:

1) Two components of anticipated costs, marital risk and marital quality, were related to type of divorce experience, although not in the expected direction; further, they did not account for a significant portion of the variance in post divorce adjustment;

2) The third component of anticipated cost, life stress was not related to type of divorce experience, but did account for some small amount of variance in post divorce adjustment; this relationship was in the expected direction with those having higher life stress also having lower post divorce adjustment;

3) A negative divorce experience was associated with higher negative social, economic and psychological consequences; having a positive divorce experience resulted in higher legal consequences;

4) A negative divorce experience did help explain a significant portion of the variance in post divorce adjustment;

5) Higher negative social, psychological and economic consequences were predictive of lower post divorce adjustment; higher overall consequences were associated with lower post divorce adjustment;

6) Sex accounted for the greatest amount of the variance in post divorce adjustment; and

7) The amount of time individuals had to respond to the divorce (prior to interview) was not a significant factor in post divorce adjustment scores.

Collectively, the findings provide evidence that the model was successful with 54 per cent of the variance in post divorce adjustment accounted for by five predictor variables. Results of the regression equation are shown in Table III.

Discussion of the Divorce Adjustment Model

The model did not, however, work exactly as we originally had hypothesized.

TABLE III

SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT MODEL MULTIPLE REGRESSION EQUATION WITH FIVE PREDICTOR VARIABLES

	Predictor Variable				
Statistic	Sex	Divorce Experience	Consequences	Life Stress	Adjustment Time
Multiple R	.545	.654	.702	.724	.733
R Squared	.297	.428	.493	.523	.537
Beta Weight	.343	-.327	-.271	-.191	.125
F Ratio	7.394**	6.733*	5.186*	2.633	1.031

*p < .05
**p < .01

The first component of the model, anticipated cost, composed of marital quality, marital risk and life stress variables, failed to work as expected. The absence of strong correlations among the three variables indicated that the index we had developed to measure anticipated cost would not work in the regression equation. Additional regression analysis indicated that life stress was associated with post divorce adjustment, while marital risk and marital quality showed no relationship with adjustment. In our final model, then, life stress was used to replace the anticipated cost variable in the multiple regression equation.

The behavior of the marital risk and marital quality variables in the analysis was unexpected. Part of the difficulty may have been the result of measurement problems. The scales were constructed post hoc and may not have adequately represented the concept inherent in anticipated cost. In addition, it may be that subjects who had not divorced previously did not approach the termination of their marriage with the same ability to define their expectations for the experience as did those who had been involved in another divorce.

It may also be that individuals who reportedly had low risk, high quality marriages and also reported a more positive divorce experience were deluding themselves. We speculated that the delusion might be related to the investment the marriage represented. To devalue the marriage would be to devalue themselves and the time they had spent in it. Indeed, to do otherwise might signal that these subjects were so undesirable themselves they had to keep what they had regardless of the quality.

Another possible explanation is sex. This derived from the more positive ratings given to their marriage by men. We suggested that males who already had made a transition to a satisfying new heterosexual relationship (as had most in our sample) would not be likely to spend much time reviewing the warts and wrinkles of a marriage done and over with as far as they were concerned. The females in our sample generally had not developed new heterosexual relationships and were, in fact, still focused on the relationship which had failed.

Yet another explanation may be that those subjects who reported their marriages as being of high quality and their divorce as being a positive experience may be optimists. That is, those subjects may be individuals who look for the good in every situation and always view their world as "looking up."

A second divergence from the model was the positive association between high legal consequences and high post divorce adjustment. We had speculated that ritualized conflict provided through the judicial system allowed subjects to externalize some of the cost of divorce. One could feel blameless and virtuous regardless of the outcome. Another explanation might be a generational or cohort effect. That is, for this age group, seeking refuge in the legal dissolution of their marriage might have been the most appropriate response. One was expected to use a lawyer and to fight.

High legal consequences did not necessarily mean an involved or protracted fight over the divorce. In fact, just the opposite was true. Although time was not a significant variable in the regression model,

generally the shorter the time the subjects had to adjust, the higher the post divorce adjustment tended to be. This finding contradicts findings in other studies. It might be that the long conflict which often preceded the contemplation of divorce resulted in most of the required emotional withdrawal taking place long before the subjects actually took any action to dissolve their marriage.

Despite the problems found in the original regression model, we found that sex, the type of divorce experience and overall consequences were predictive of post divorce adjustment. Taken together these three variables accounted for one-half of the variance in post divorce adjustment scores. An indication of the strength of the model was found in the results of analysis conducted on several single variables found to be correlated with post divorce adjustment. Put into a regression model, single variables such as health status and fertility did not account for more than five per cent of the variance in post divorce adjustment.

While the type of divorce experience and overall consequences account for twenty per cent of the variance in post divorce adjustment, in each model we tested sex accounted for the greatest amount of variance in subject scores. Obviously sex only explains variance in the statistical sense. Females aren't necessarily born with less ability to adapt; indeed, the biological evidence indicates that they may be more able to adapt to' change in their environment. If an innate difference doesn't explain the lowered capacity of females to adjust to divorce successfully, then, the question we must ask ourselves is what circumstances are responsible.

The data would suggest the deck is stacked against the successful adjustment of older females in particular. Their chance of

remarriage is low and they have almost no hope of establishing a satisfying heterosexual relationship even though that is perceived as the single most important ingredient necessary for successful adjustment. The need for friendships and organized activity is high, yet females often perceive themselves as shut out and being treated as unwelcome "fifth wheels." Females experience a heightened sense of personal failure yet they are less effective in resolving their problems, at least partially because they do not know how to marshall resources in response to their problems.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings in this study have potential theoretical and policy implications. The philosophical view under which individuals operate may affect the way in which they respond to non-normative events such as divorce. Models which are predicated on rationality may not work very well in predicting outcomes for individuals not accustomed to viewing the world in that mode. We must ask ourselves if a particular philosophical view predominates in a given culture and how alternative perspectives are to be accommodated by existing theoretical models.

Our findings point to other major implications as well. One implication is that the formalized, managed dissolution of marriage is important. If it did nothing else but signify the actual end of a marital union so that individuals could get on with building a new life, the divorce process would be important. But it apparently plays a more important role, allowing individuals to shift events in such a way as to sanitize any hint of culpability for the failure of their marriage. We could argue, in fact, that formalized dissolution is important enough that the movement to divorce by

mail or mass trial may be potentially destructive even to individuals who think they agree on the need to dissolve their marriage. It is equally important, however, that the confrontation be skillfully managed. There was apparently very little gained by merely increasing the level of conflict in the divorce process.

The implications for the law in these findings are very suggestive. On the one hand, the data suggest that subjects ending their marriage need a method to argue for or against the termination of their marriage. Fault, or blame if you will, is a concept which is deeply rooted in the psyche of the individuals in our sample. Existing "no fault" divorce law does not appear to prevent individuals from attempting to externalize the blame for the failure of their marriage, but it does appear to cast them in a somewhat unfavorable light if they seek to do it publicly or legally. In other words, under no fault divorce the termination of the marriage is supposed to be a quiet, decorous event where all parties concerned amiably agree to all conditions. Unfortunately, this seldom is the case. Resistant parties now have few options but to go kicking and screaming into court where they may be treated either as objects of pity or as obdurate complainers.

The difficulty with family law issues, such as those presented by divorce, is that equity is not easily found for all involved. One potential solution is increased routine use of an arbitration or mediation process to negotiate outcomes in conflictive marriages. Such a process might provide a more positive way for individuals to work through the failure of their marriage.

Another implication is found in the lopsided effect of divorce in late life on women. While much has been said about the need for older men to expand their identity beyond work so that retirement is less traumatic for them, much less has been said about providing meaningful alternatives or expanding the number of roles available to older women. Many are not prepared to function in roles other than that of wife and mother. With their parental role reduced and their status as spouse taken away these women are ill prepared emotionally, financially or socially to adapt.

Worse yet there is little help available to older women. Often they do not feel comfortable with the type of assertive feminism practiced by younger displaced homemakers. Judges, lawyers, clergymen, professional counselors and social service workers appear either as unknown or unhelpful figures. Their rage, fear and pain often seemed excessive, if not unseemly, even to themselves. Women such as these create an interesting dilemma for society. They reflect a socialization process which emphasized a set of expectations which are no longer held by the majority of society's members.

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